

DRAMA *Works*

Plays Through Practice

A DOLL'S HOUSE

by

HENRIK IBSEN

EXTRACT

CONTENTS

	<u>PAGE</u>
BRIEF OVERVIEW OF IBSEN'S LIFE AND WORKS	4
BRIEF PLOT OUTLINE	6
BRIEF CHARACTER SKETCHES	9
WORKING THROUGH THE TEXT IN A PRACTICAL WAY	13
ACT ONE OPENING STAGE DIRECTIONS & SETTING	
13	
NORA AND TORVALD HELMER	15
MRS LINDE AND NORA	22
ENTER KROGSTAD	28
ENTER DR RANK	31
NORA WHEEDLES A JOB FOR HER FRIEND	33
NORA AS MOTHER	34
NORA AND KROGSTAD	
35	
FROM KROGSTAD'S EXIT TO END OF ACT ONE	40
ACT TWO THE OPENING WITH THE NURSE	43
NORA AND MRS LINDE	44
NORA AND HELMER	46
NORA AND DR RANK	48
NORA AND KROGSTAD	
53	
NORA AND MRS LINDE	57
THE END OF ACT TWO	58
ACT THREE MRS LINDE AND KROGSTAD	61
UP TO DR RANK'S FINAL ENTRANCE	62
DR RANK'S LAST VISIT	64

A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF IBSEN'S LIFE AND WORKS.

Henrik Ibsen was born in 1828, the son of a merchant, in Skien, a town in South-East Norway. Most of the early part of his life was spent in poverty. His father's business failed when Ibsen was six, and the family moved away from the town. It was necessary that Ibsen find work as soon as he could, so he became an apprentice apothecary in a tiny seaport called Grimstad, at the age of fifteen. There he lived for six years on the meagre earnings of an apprentice. He also had his first love-affair there, with a servant girl called Sofie Jensdatter, who bore him an illegitimate son. Ibsen was only seventeen at this time.

In 1849, he wrote his first play, *Catiline*, a tragedy set in ancient Rome and owing a lot to Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*. The play, as with all his early works, was written in verse. On the strength of this, which stirred a great desire for learning in the twenty-one year old Ibsen, he left his apprenticeship a year later and became a student in Christiania [now called Oslo.]

His studentship was short-lived, though his passion for the theatre bore fruit and in 1851 he was invited to join the newly-formed National Theatre of Norway at Bergen. Ole Bull, who ran the theatre, encouraged the young man and Ibsen stayed for six years there, writing - still in verse - directing, designing costumes and keeping the accounts. The experience stood him in good stead, giving him a thorough grounding in the all-round craft of theatre, which he compounded by visiting other famous theatres in Copenhagen and Dresden.

During this period he continued to churn out verse dramas: historical tragedies, melodrama, romantic comedies, flights of fancy into the supernatural. All but one was a failure. This one, *The Feast at Solhaug*, a melodrama about two sisters in love with the same man, introduced him to his wife to be: Suzannah Thoreson.

Despite having limited success as a playwright, Ibsen continued to be prolific. In 1857, at twenty-nine, with six plays behind him, he was asked to become artistic director of the Christiania Norwegian Theatre. A year later he married Suzannah and a year later, 1859 his son, Sigurd, was born. They were to have no more children.

The next few years, with a family to support, were hard. Ibsen succumbed to despair and found himself unable to write. Finally, after a gap of five years, he wrote a verse satire called *Love's Comedy*. Even his own theatre, in dire straits itself, rejected the play. Shortly after, the theatre itself went bankrupt.

The following year, an extremely hard one financially, Ibsen tried to get a number of jobs with a literary or theatrical bent. He also applied to the government for a grant, which was refused. He borrowed extensively from moneylenders to keep going and wrote another historical verse tragedy called *The Pretenders*. In 1864 this was staged and was a success. Finally his friends clubbed together and raised enough money to help Ibsen to travel; this was augmented by a Government travel and research grant, given because of the success of his last play. For the next twenty-seven years, Ibsen worked and lived abroad.

From 1864 to 1868 he lived in Rome, writing there the verse dramas *Brand* and *Peer Gynt*. Neither of these were intended for performance. In 1868 he moved to Germany where, eventually, he turned back to the theatre for his form of expression, having turned his back on it after leaving his native Norway. Germany, he found, was alive theatrically, unlike the rest of Europe, in his opinion, who were still caught up in the need for presenting 'well-made plays'. [The 'well-made play' was a phrase coined by Eugene Scribe, a French dramatist working in the first half of the nineteenth century. He himself wrote over four hundred plays, all perfectly crafted, with theatrical 'moments' built-in to the structure,

Extract

WORKING THROUGH THE TEXT IN A PRACTICAL WAY

From the beginning the exercises assume a knowledge of the story-line and what happens to the characters. It is important, therefore, that before you start the following work you will have read the play. At the very least, you should have read the synopsis and character sketches that precede this section.

I try never to be dictatorial in the practical work. There is no version that is more right or more wrong than another. What the following work hopes to encourage is the habit of experiment. Too often, when you read a line it is the first meaning that becomes fixed in the mind. Often this could be just the most obvious and other subtler interpretations might add richness to the character.

It is important that you also get in the habit of recording the results of all the work you do. When experimenting with a character this is especially important. At the end you will need to go through all your work on each character once more, checking that your decisions make sense. People can be contradictory in real life, of course, but not to the point of absurdity!

ACT ONE

THE OPENING STAGE DIRECTIONS AND THEIR SETTING IMPLICATIONS

Ibsen takes pains to point out exactly the social class and circumstances of the Helmer family through his opening stage directions. **Read them carefully as a group and then discuss the following points, observing what clues he gives us.**

1. What time of year is it? What clues are in the stage directions? How important is the time of year to the play as a whole? Consider feelings about Christmas.... snow... winter. Does 'coldness' feature as a theme in the play - or the spirit of generosity and giving - which is one of the messages of Christmas? Discuss this. Should the season be pointed out strongly in your stage design and how might you do that?

2. The Helmer's are clearly comfortably off. What about these stage directions help that impression?

3. Having read the play, you will know that money is an important element in the play. Ibsen tells us clearly that the room is comfortable and tasteful but not extravagant/ expensive in its decor. Is this because they cannot afford more or because Torvald is too mean or is he just admirably careful?

A note: I used to find students became quite confused about Torvald Helmer's name. He is called Helmer in the script to indicate who is speaking, which is actually his surname. Torvald is his Christian name. Sometimes I call him by one and sometimes by the other - just so long as the students are clear! I suppose the fact that Ibsen tends to call him Helmer says something about how he should be viewed as a character: he is altogether more formal than first-name-Nora.

A lot hangs on how you view the relationship between the couple in the first part of the play. Who is boss in the relationship? Who would have more influence on the furnishings and decor? Might you be able to reflect this in your choice of furniture and also of the colours

used for fabrics, upholstery and so on? e.g. You might decide that Torvald is a repressive influence and so choose to make furniture heavy and made from rather dark wood, for instance. But then you might want to show Nora's frippiness and extravagance by little details - flowers, ornaments - or light coloured cushions.

Your choice of furniture and colour can say a lot to an audience.

Remember this is a one set play - though little details change from act to act. It needs to be interesting enough to hold an audience's interest and it also needs to convey the atmosphere and messages from the play.

At first, examine the naturalistic route - i.e. a setting that is in keeping with the period and location of the play. Look ahead at the opening directions of each of the other two acts, adding the information gleaned from these to the sum of your knowledge. From them, you will discover that the Christmas tree, in the first Act simply brought on, clearly has some symbolic significance. Discuss the symbolism of the burnt out candles and the dishevelled appearance of the tree described at the beginning of Act 2.

The beginning of Act 3 reminds us that the Helmer's home is an apartment in a block of similar apartments. In the script we discover that their flat is not on the ground floor - but it is not at the top of the building either. They are invited to a party in the apartment above their's in the last Act. Knowing this can give a designer other ideas for symbolism, whilst keeping the real life feel of the setting.

The play is called *A Doll's House*. It also has recurring images of Nora as a caged bird. Discuss how you might use the set - whilst not moving out of a sense of a real place - to suggest either the doll's house or the idea that Nora is trapped. Consider:

the placement and style of the furniture

the window - its style, the view, etc.

the placement of the rooms indicated 'off' - such as Torvald's study, whose door is indicated in the text

The details Ibsen gives, such as engravings on the wall, china in a cabinet, books and so on are important for what reason? Do they indicate anything about the character of any member of the family? Or are they there just to enhance a period and class feel to the set?

One thing that is clear from the description of this room is that there are many separate little areas - almost rooms within a room. Near the stove there is a rocking chair and a couple of other chairs; near the window is a little sofa, a table and more chairs. There is a piano. There are doors to still other areas. **In groups, map out a sketched floor plan maximising the use of these areas. The way these are organised will mean the whole area of the stage is used; movement between the varied parts of the stage will add visual interest for the audience.**

Make sure that there is enough space for the action. Discuss, for instance, how you might want to create the feeling of Nora's 'cage' without sacrificing the movement of the actors.

Might levels help your staging - for instance, having Torvald's study on a raised level - even considerably raised, like on a balcony overlooking the living area. What advantages and disadvantages might such a suggestion have?

The play is so strongly wrapped in symbolism that it is impossible, I think, to present a set design without any. But you need to decide how far you want to go. Of course, an obvious [but nonetheless effective] view of the set as a doll's house, with a front that opens to

reveal the inside, is worth considering. Using the furniture to suggest caging, or male chauvinism, or having bars on the window - and so on - are all things that can be done without losing the idea of a realistic set. Make sure that you research styles of furniture, textiles and colours. How far would you want a Scandinavian period feel to the play - or don't you think this matters? Would you want to make it more applicable to this country? All these things you must consider.

I have seen a number of versions of this play. The best happened to have, also, a realistic set. But it still had plenty of symbolism in it. Nora, as the play progressed, seemed more and more hampered by the heavy furniture, which at moments of high emotion she groped round. This solid, dark stuff seemed to symbolise Torvald's nature, and was overlaid by a froth of pretty light cushions to symbolise Nora. Through the window we saw snow falling and sound effects gave us passing horses and shouts, clearly from the street down below. We saw only the tops of buildings the other side of the street, which also gave us a trapped feeling - though with a view of the light white sky beyond. The door to the hall was used to suggest freedom beyond. The door to Torvald's study was prominent, dark and brooding.

The worst production I saw had an entirely symbolic setting. The whole thing was a bird cage, containing many perches and levels. There was nothing wrong with the idea, which could have worked if enough space was given on any one level for the actors to act. Unfortunately, though, the perch idea was carried through, hampering the actors, who had to constantly move up and down a variety of steps and platforms. The movement was clumsy, in consequence. It was an example of a design which hindered rather than enhanced the action.

Having fully discussed the set, so far as it is possible at this stage - bearing in mind you may well change your mind by the time you have worked through the whole text practically - decide on a final floor plan, which you are going to use as a basis for your following work. Then map it out in your performance space, indicating doors, windows and all furniture. Of course use chairs and tables as far as you can from what is littered round your studio, but otherwise use blocks or chairs again to indicate everything else - such as the piano. Make sure everyone in the group knows exactly what each item stands for and are thoroughly acquainted with the layout of the room, the exits and entrances. You can indicate doorways by two chairs and a gap between. Check how practical all this appears to be - is there enough space? Is enough prominence given to features you know from reading the text are important?

Finally note your working decisions down. This 'set' must be built quickly every time you work on the text.

NORA & TORVALD HELMER Beginning of Act 1 up to the entry of Mrs Linde [*Pages 1-6 Dover; Pages 23-28 Methuen*]

Having described the set, Ibsen introduces us to Nora in these opening stage directions. What is our initial impression of her? Do you think she has enjoyed her shopping spree

- a) because she likes to shop for its own sake?
- b) because she is a generous person and enjoys the satisfaction of having chosen well for her loved ones?
- c) because she is so rarely out of the house and free from her husband that this trip is a rare freedom. Its influence is still with her, carried in her wake like a breath of fresh air?
- d) because, with Torvald's new job she feels that all money problems are over and she can have fun and be extravagant, even though he hasn't yet begun in his new post?

You may of course decide that there are elements of all the above in Nora's mind. But actually, choices have to be made even now. For instance, if you think c] is the one that appeals to you, that would give an entirely different mood to the first few lines than choosing any of the others.

Read the first few lines up to Nora popping the macaroons in her pocket, trying it under the influence of the following:

- a] a natural shopaholic, Nora, delighted by the promise of more prosperity in their lives has splashed out and is filled with the bubbly fun this has induced in her
- b] repressed by her husband, this sense of freedom has quite gone to Nora's head. She is in a dangerous state, like someone drunk after their first taste of alcohol. There is a brittleness, an edginess to her voice and actions
- c] repressed by her husband, Nora is reluctant to let go of the rare fun she has had. She is prepared to defend her extravagance. There is an undercurrent of rebellion to this opening
- d] Nora has shopped wisely and is pleased with her purchases which have been chosen carefully out of love rather than extravagance. She is filled with a feeling of love for her whole family, and the Christmas spirit of giving has taken her over.

What do you make of Helmer's calling her his little lark [*often just songbird in Methuen*] and his squirrel? Are they apt descriptions of Nora? How far do you think they are symbolic? Brainstorm each one:

skylark/ lark.... sings beautifully ... high in the sky.....

squirrel bushy tail ... fluffy ... hoardes things....

As symbols it seems to me they are double-edged. Helmer means something by them - something patronising and diminishing of her perhaps [though I don't think he'd realise that consciously] but also there's something about the frantic song of the bird, so high that it appears to teeter on the outer edge of the world, as if desperate to escape; the squirrel, too, with its habit of burying things and then forgetting where... Both have resonances that have something of the truth of Nora in them which underlies what Helmer intends by them.

How does Nora respond to being called these things? Try:

automatically - she is so used to the labels that they are nothing to her

gaily - playing a game they both established between them long ago

sounding happy but through gritted teeth - irritated but burying the feeling

Which do you think most likely?

Discuss the implications of the stage direction: 'Puts the bag of macaroons into her pocket and wipes her mouth.' What does it suggest about the couple's relationship? Is Nora childish to behave like this?

An excellent production I saw some years ago, with Janet McTeer and Owen Teale as Nora and Helmer, had Nora hiding the macaroons under the lid of the piano - suggestive of a squirrel's buried hoarde perhaps. I mention it, because it has always seemed to me that popping it in her pocket would be dangerous if she truly fears Helmer's reaction... rustling paper and so on. Though it *is* evidence of an impulsive and not very long-sighted approach to things, which is also true of Nora.

Carefully read the section from Helmer popping out of the study having been alerted and alarmed by the word 'bought', up to the end of Helmer's speech

beginning 'That is like a woman' [Dover] / ['Oh Nora, Nora, how like a woman!' Methuen].

As if you were the two protagonists, presenting their separate viewpoints in a debate, summarise the main points each makes.

What is your impression of Nora here? Do you, like her husband, see her as a 'featherhead/ spendthrift'? Is she naive, careless, childish? Discuss how you would want an audience to see her here.

I think it's important to remember that Nora is at the start of a journey - a journey which the audience are also taken on. It is possibly important that there is some irritation with Nora's silliness and even some sympathy with Helmer's point of view, however irritating the girls will find it! This is because Nora must be seen to grow up extraordinarily during the course of the play, gaining in stature and dignity as she does so.

Having said that, it is also important that balance must be found. Nora should not, in my opinion, be so childish that she antagonises the audience. There should always be a sparkle and charm about her so that we are carried willingly on her journey.

Helmer, too, must be seen in a balanced way. It doesn't work to play him too unsympathetically, so as to antagonise the audience. It is his journey, too, that we are witnessing.

Bearing the idea of balance in mind, try out Helmer's speech 'That is like a woman!...' bottom of Page 2, Dover/ ['Oh Nora, Nora, so like a woman...' top of Page 25, Methuen] in the following ways:

heavy-handed, didactic, like a teacher

patiently, kindly trying to explain

with fire - this is a passionate belief

What differences do these three methods make to a) sympathy for Helmer's character in general and b) his movement, body language, stature? Which do you think works best, bearing in mind that your choice will influence other choices throughout the play?

As a corollary to the above, how old do you think Helmer is? They have young children, which will make Nora in the mid-to late twenties, women tending to marry around the late teens, up to about twenty-one, in those days. Often men waited to marry until they earned enough money to support a wife and family. This meant that it was common for a man in his late thirties, early forties to marry a young woman of the age mentioned above. This could be true in Helmer's case and might go some way to explaining his fatherly attitude. On the other hand, we all know young men with old heads on their shoulders, so this too could be true. So decide in your mind whether Helmer is around the early thirties, if he married Nora as a relatively young man, or mid-to late forties, as an older man. Which makes most sense to you?

An idea in your mind as to his age might help you decide whether he is played with the fire of a young man or the stolidity of an older one. Are his opinions relatively new and as yet barely tested, or are they settled and well-tried?

Anxiety about money and debt is established then as one of Helmer's characteristics and a main theme of the play. Our first sight of him is telling. 'Don't disturb me,' he says. But then pops out almost immediately to see the damage Nora might have caused with her spending. The pen still in his hand shows how he hasn't been able to settle back to his work because of the niggling worry.